BOY FRIENDS

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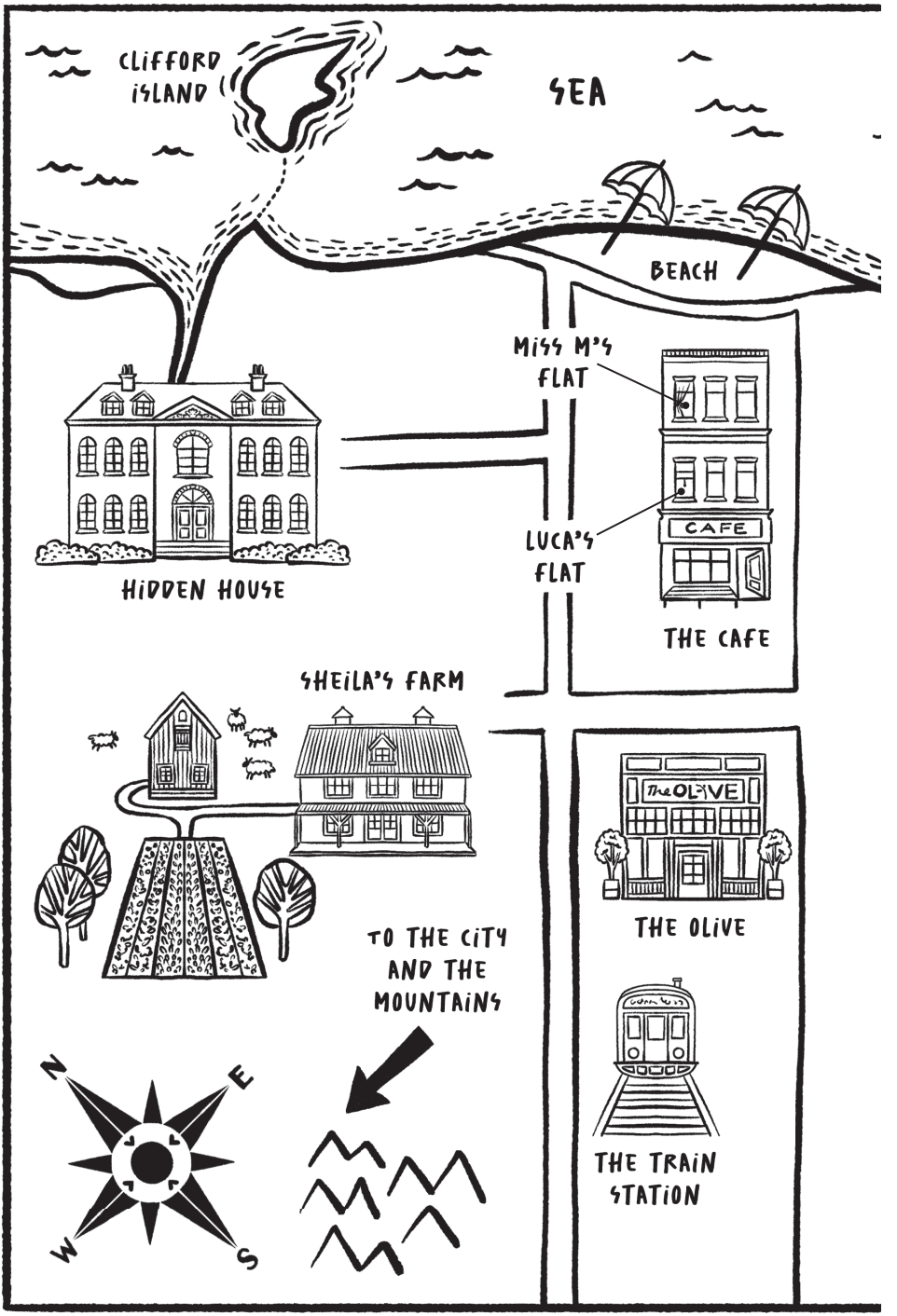


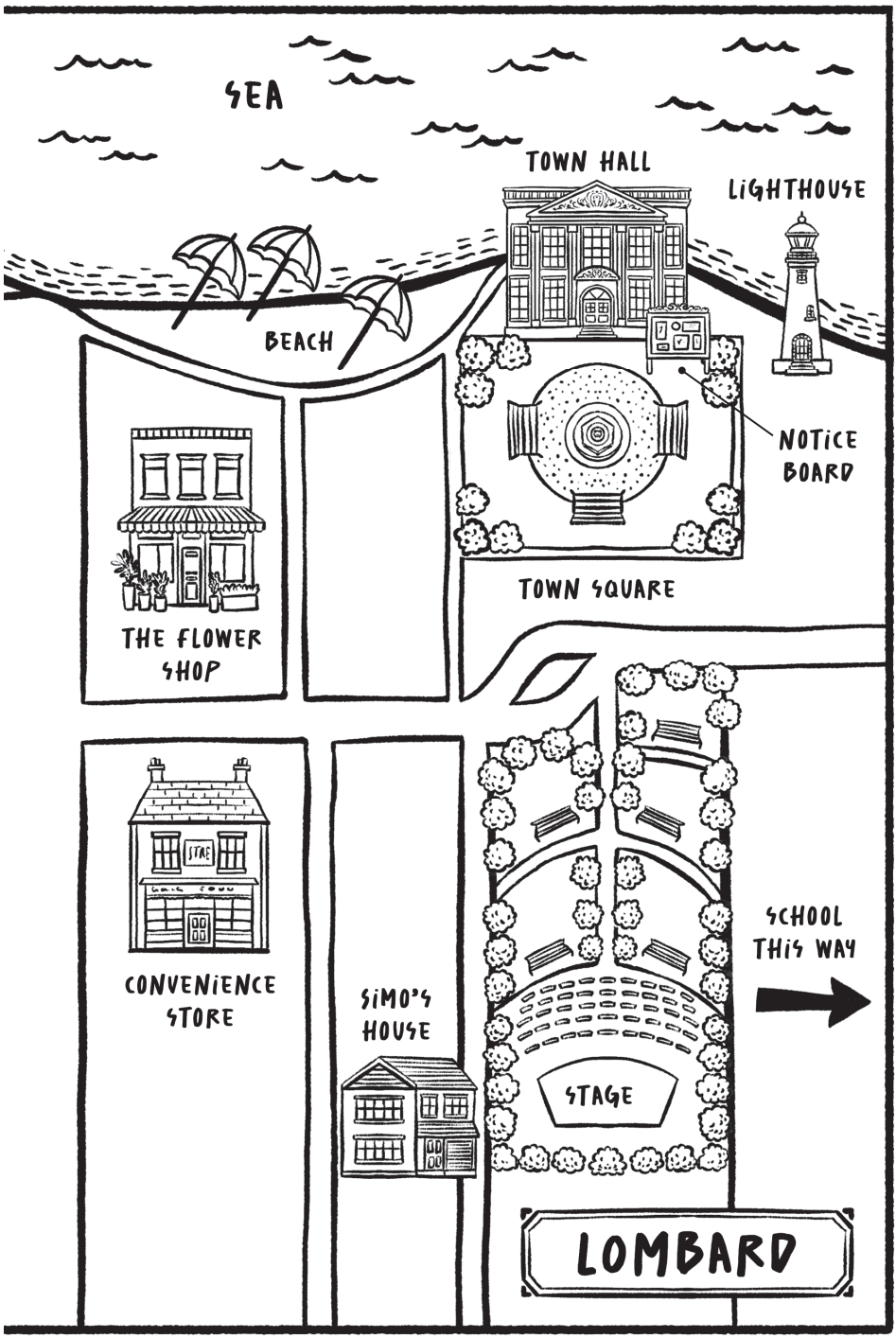
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To Aaron

‘To burn with desire and keep quiet about it is the greatest punishment we can bring on ourselves.’

Federico García Lorca, *Blood Wedding* (1932)


CLIFFORD ISLAND
SEA
BEACH
MISS M'S FLAT
LUCA'S FLAT
CAFE
HIDDEN HOUSE
THE CAFE
SHEILA'S FARM
THE OLIVE
THE OLIVE
TO THE CITY AND THE MOUNTAINS
THE TRAIN STATION
N
E
W
S


SEA
TOWN HALL
LIGHTHOUSE
BEACH
NOTICE BOARD
TOWN SQUARE
THE FLOWER SHOP
CONVENIENCE STORE
SIMO'S HOUSE
SCHOOL THIS WAY
STAGE
LOMBARD

PROLOGUE

It's twelve minutes past five on a Sunday morning, when I realise I'm in love with Simo Lorca. The thought that I love my best friend arrives fully formed in my head, like it's always been there. A piece of knowledge I've held for so long, yet always chosen to ignore. There's no denying it. I am in love with him. And suddenly the truth isn't scary at all. It's just fact.

Next to me on the sofa, Simo sighs in his sleep. His warmth seeps into my skin, his breath the only sound. We're sprawled out on the L-shaped couch, my legs facing one wall, his legs another; our heads meet in the middle. From where I lie propped up on a bunch of cushions, my gaze falls across his sleeping form.

His chest lifts and breath escapes through his parted lips. And maybe it's the first rays of the rising sun that press against the curtains and fill the lounge with a cool glow, or it's ten years of soaking up his features, but Simo's lips are what a Renaissance painter's wet dreams are made of. The bottom lip is full and soft, while the upper lip is two sharp lines arcing into a Cupid's bow.

I have never allowed myself to think about kissing

them. To imagine their weight on mine. That's asking for heartbreak, and I don't have a single masochistic bone in my body. But in the early morning, with the world still caught in a dream and Simo dreaming next to me, I see clearly. For the first time, loving him comes easy.

Even in his sleep, Simo remains calm and put together. He rests on his back, duvet tucked in, no slobber in the corner of his mouth, his hair perfectly tousled. His lashes form two dark curves against the rise of his cheeks, and I almost – almost – reach out to trace them. The half-light softens his edges, steals his imperfections. I miss the pockmarks on his temples, even though they make him feel self-conscious. I like the spattering of scars on his skin, though I have never told him this. In my eyes, they make him even more beautiful. The vein above his eyebrow has faded into shadow too, the one that appears whenever he's deep in thought, or when he gets annoyed with me. Sometimes I provoke him just to see it pop.

He doesn't stir when I pull the TV remote out from under his shoulder, careful not to disturb his dreams. We stayed up late, celebrating his birthday, only for midnight to strike and mine to begin. We were born on consecutive days, hours apart. We always spend our birthdays together, as they blend into each other, making sure we remain the exact same age.

With a deep breath, I sink back into the sofa. My body grows heavy and my eyes flutter shut.

I know that when I wake up again, this moment of clarity will appear to me like a dream. I'll turn to him, seconds away from telling him every fuzzy detail I recall – *Simo, I*

had the strangest dream; I was in love with you, would you believe it? – but I'll stay silent. Because I'm not ready to say it in bright daylight. So right now, in this moment with him close to me, I savour the peace. I am filled by the knowledge that I love the boy lying next to me. With one heavy blink, consciousness slips away. The last thing I see is the shape of him filling my vision, following me into slumber.

SUMMER



CHAPTER 1 – LUCA

September is a controversial month. Nobody questions August's summer status, and October annually turns into a cult-like festival where the average person obsesses over knit jumpers and pumpkin spice. But September remains stuck in an identity crisis so severe that even the Christmas crowd tries to claim it through the strategic distribution of chocolate Santas. When I was eleven, I started a petition to ban the sale of Christmas-related goods before November, but I only collected three signatures – Dad, Simo and Miss M – and had to admit defeat.

I make my way up to the second floor of our building, a mug in one hand filled to the brim with coffee – black, three sugars – minding every step I take in my sliders. Like every Monday, the lady of the house awaits my attendance. I can feel her impatience simmer before I've reached her door. I knock and walk into the flat, incense lingering in the air. She sits by the window, glancing out on to the street, like a queen observing her kingdom. Her curls are a deep silver, a stark contrast against her umber skin. She taps the tabletop, every finger adorned with rings. She's unchanged from how I remember her from when I was a toddler.

Loyalty and love make my chest swell, and as if she senses the shift, she turns. A grin splits her face.

'How dare you expose your toes to an old lady, and before I've had my coffee!'

I smirk back and set the mug down in front of her. Miss M opens her arms wide and wraps me into a hug, bony but strong. Then she orders me into a chair without releasing my hand. Her eyes fall on the necklace that rests on my chest, but she doesn't comment. It's a fine golden chain with a pearl pendant, shaped into a round disk no bigger than a thumbprint, its surface uneven, like crests on a wave. '*I know pearls are passé or something*,' Simo had said when it struck midnight and he'd placed the gift box in my hands, '*but I saw this and thought of you*.'

The memory, barely a day old, gives me goosebumps.

'Now, tell me about the bonfire last night. It all but smoked up my apartment!'

Miss M has a taste for dramatics. While it may be true that the wind carried wisps of bonfire smoke all the way up the street from the beach and through her top-floor window, I know she still welcomes every source that keeps her informed of the goings-on in town.

'It was perfect,' I say, and I mean it. It's one of my favourite birthday traditions. There's something magical about a fire by the sea. Flames tickling the sky as it turns purple. Stars popping up by the millions. Dad to my left, Simo to my right, as we hold sticks towards the flames, the dough wrapped around them gaining a golden crust within minutes. Then we slather the still-warm bread in sour cream and cheese and herbs and olives. The latter is a new

development. I used to detest olives, but eating them feels very adult. It's what I like to think of as character growth.

I tell Miss M all this and she nods and hums, her eyes half closed. 'Paul shut the kiosk and joined us with ciders,' I tell her. 'Librarian Joni brought her dog and her guitar and had Dad choking on his food with some of her bawdier sea shanties. And even Simo's parents came by to say hi, though they didn't stick around.'

'Don't like sea shanties, do they?'

'Not exactly,' I say. Simo's parents are complicated, to say the least, but they have their reasons. 'You should have joined us, Miss M. We missed you.'

Miss M effectively adopted us when Dad showed up in Lombard one day, with my heavily pregnant mum and a broken-down car. Seventeen years later, Miss M is the most constant person in my life, apart from Dad. And Simo, though Miss M has been around for longer. She is the only grandparent I have ever had.

Miss M gently presses the palm of my hand. 'I'm not one for beach outings. I prefer the comfort of my home to any other place on earth, you know that.'

I also know she hasn't left her flat in months. I know she's happy in her own home. She loves few things more than people flocking to her doorstep like carrier pigeons to feed her gossip. When I was a child, she used to be the epicentre of Lombard social life, but after a couple of ugly falls, she withdrew to her flat. Now she observes everything in the town below her from her perch up high.

'And what about my favourite explorer? My very own Jane Goodall?'

She always asks this question, but I rarely have anything new to tell her. 'Mum is Mum. She's probably crouching in the dirt right now with a pair of binoculars, watching a rare bird pick a worm out of the mud.'

Miss M grunts, satisfied by the image I've drawn.

'She says she'll be back in the country when I turn eighteen next summer.' Mum is often the first person I speak to on my birthday. But sometimes, like last night, Simo beats her to it. He's usually right there when Mum phones from half a planet away.

'She can't miss her baby becoming a man,' Miss M confirms.

I nod, but then I think, Mum's missing so many other things. She tries to keep up and makes me tell her everything that's going on in my honestly not that exciting life. But it means she only hears about things after they've happened, rather than being a part of them. I don't think she regrets moving away, but I can tell that she misses Lombard – and Dad and me – more than she lets on.

'School's calling,' I tell Miss M, then let go of her hand.

'Ah, a new year. Are you excited, Luca?'

I shrug. 'Just like every other year, isn't it?' Change means chaos, and I like the way things are.

'We'll see,' says Miss M with the authority of someone decades older than me. 'Don't forget to send me today's message on the noticeboard!' she calls in lieu of a goodbye.

'I'd never forget!' I shout back, the familiar words rolling off my tongue before the door to her flat falls shut behind me.

We do this every Monday morning; I bring her coffee

and updates from the cafe, and she gets to inquire about my life and give me advice that I generally ignore. In my defence, Miss M gives awful advice for someone so old. I'm not going to start eating liquorice because it allegedly 'makes ashy elbows moist again'. Body lotion exists for a reason, and besides, liquorice is rank.

I descend the stairs to the first floor, where I've lived all my life. I change into more sensible footwear, grab my school bag from my room and make my way down to the cafe on the ground floor. There's chatter in the air and the smell of freshly ground coffee.

'Miss M all good?' Dad asks from behind the counter, busily filling pots of tea with steaming hot water.

'Chirpy as ever,' I respond. I grab a sourdough sandwich and a chocolate cookie, the latter earning me a stern look. Dad disapproves of sweets for breakfast but doesn't get the chance to tell me off. A group of half a dozen tourists enter the already crammed place, and so I use the opportunity to escape.

Out on the street, I'm hit by a wave of salty air and the familiar cries of seagulls as they circle the town from above. A quick jog takes me to the promenade. The ocean glimmers silver in the sunlight, as I go to greet Paul in his kiosk. Instead of waving back, Paul turns towards the radio and frantically begins working its buttons. I don't think much of his strange behaviour, until a pack of primary-school kids walking the other way spots me and instantly stops chatting. They giggle as I pass, and I make sure that I'm zipped up. I go to check if there's something on my face with my phone camera and see several missed calls

from Simo. I hit the call button.

The boulevard begins to slope up, taking me above sea level. If you pluck Piccadilly Circus out of London, then swap the mega-screens for a big slab of wood fixed between two poles and stick the whole thing bang on the coast of our little town, you basically get Lombard town square. It's way cuter though, I think as I step on to the cobbled square from one side, with the town hall and a lighthouse offering shelter from the sea wind and rowan trees dotted all around, their branches loaded with red berries.

'Have you seen it?' Simo says, picking up after just one ring.

'Seen what?'

'You haven't seen it.' His voice is oddly toneless. 'Where are you?'

'Almost at the noticeboard,' I reply, rounding the square so I can read the announcement.

The thing about the noticeboard is that its message changes weekly. Most of the time, it'll be birthday wishes for residents reaching a significant age, or a massive storm warning, or holiday greetings. But now and then we get something hilarious or unexpectedly raunchy, like the time when Linda, the mailwoman, announced a split from her husband after she caught him cheating with the pet-shop owner. For a week, all of Lombard saw the words *HARRY HICKS SLEEPS WITH FLEAS* blasted across the town square. Suffice it to say that nobody's seen Harry since, and the pet shop shut down a few weeks later.

Heloise, the mayor's right hand, is watering the plants in front of the lighthouse, but freezes when she sees me, as if

I caught her in the middle of committing a crime. 'Why is everyone acting so weird today?'

'Luca, I need you to—'

'Wait,' I interrupt Simo. 'Let me take a picture of the message and send it to Miss M.'

I open my phone's camera, stride towards the noticeboard – and stop short. My heart drops out of my chest and my phone clatters to the ground. I don't hear it fall, don't hear Simo calling my name. Paralysed, I stare up at the board, each letter the size of a loaf of bread.

The words are absolutely, terrifyingly impossible to miss.

There in black and white, my best-hidden feelings turned inside out for all the world to see.



'I ship it!'

'Congrats, you guys!'

'This is so cute I could die!'

Students I've never even spoken to shout at me from across the school hallway. Others pat my back, and a group of guys holler and clap in a weirdly non-offensive way. One girl shrieks so loudly I almost run into a locker to escape her, and I swear there are tears in her eyes.

I walked to school in a state of shock, skipped registration

by hiding behind the bike shed in a state of shock, then sat through design and technology in a state of shock. So far, I've successfully avoided Simo; avoided thinking about what this means for him, for me, for us. But as I'm headed to English, I know he'll be there. We'll be sharing a table for the next two hours. I've never been so scared to face him. Usually his presence fills me with a sense of calm that no other person can induce, but today just the thought of him has the opposite effect. I want to run.

It's like I'm experiencing my worst nightmare, the embarrassing sort, where you end up naked in front of your entire school. Except I'd prefer that humiliation to everyone knowing that I'm in love with Simo. To *Simo* knowing I'm in love with him. But I'm painfully awake and about to be sick in a school bin.

I stop in front of the classroom. I *could* run. If your gut tells you to do something, why would you ignore it? But the only thing worse than facing Simo would be to avoid him forever. Not just a logistical impossibility in a town this small, it would also, quite possibly, break my actual heart. So I do what I've been doing for the past ten years: pretend I'm not in love with my best friend. I've lied so well I even had myself fooled.

I try not to trip over my feet as I walk in and slide on to the chair next to him. I take a notebook out of my bag, a pen, a bottle of water that's as good as empty, a pack of tissues I don't need, anything to keep me busy. Simo doesn't interrupt, but I can feel his eyes bore into me. When there's nothing left in my bag I could possibly require, I send him a sideways glance.

Simo is looking right at me, and to everyone else he might appear mildly amused. But I can tell by the most gradual raise of his brows – his flawless, ever so sorrowful brows – and the stark vein between them, that he's annoyed. It's a look that topples my defences, which pretty much applies to every look he sends me. But in this awkward, excruciating mess we're in, I realise that I need him and that he needs me. I'm about to launch into an explanation, or an apology, just to say something, but I'm cut off before I get the chance.

Mrs Leppla enters with a stack of books and plonks them on her desk. 'Students, meet your required reading for the year.'

A choir of groans rises, and I want to join in. For the next two hours I'll be unable to focus on anything but Simo's presence beside me. I prepare for 120 minutes of intrusive thoughts, but when Simo shifts his weight, and our arms touch, my mind hushes. Despite everything, he never fails to have this effect on me. And, truth be told, there are far worse things to think about than Simo Lorca.

When class is over and the room empties, we stay in our seats, compelled by an unspoken agreement. I do my best to ignore the curious glances and all-but-quiet whispers around us, but I can't help squirming. Simo musters an unbothered expression, but the vein remains. The last student leaves the room, and we're alone.

Silence spreads. I don't want to prolong this any more, and so I square my shoulders and face him. The problem is, I can't put my thoughts into words, and for once it's not

because the sight of his soft brown eyes makes me forget my own name. Though it's not helping either.

Simo also seems at a loss. He starts, then closes his mouth again. I watch him do this four times, his expression darkening. It'd be cute if I wasn't shaking in my trainers. At the fifth attempt, he succeeds.

'Someone told me we're their Bella and Edward, but less toxic.'

We stare at each other for several beats. I might break out in tears or panicked laughter, but my body can't decide which emotion to give into.

'Someone told me we're *almost* as cute as Nick and Charlie,' I say instead, trying to gauge his reaction.

'My psychology teacher said she'd like us cast in *Red, White & Royal Blue*.' Simo's face slips into a grimace and I make a gagging sound, and that's when we finally break. Simo wheezes, his entire body rocking with silent laughter. Tears pour down my face and I slide to the floor, unable to stay upright on my chair. This delirious episode lasts several minutes, until we have caught our breath again.

Simo's head appears beneath the table. His eyes are red-rimmed and when he speaks, it sounds as if he's caught a cold.

'You staying down there or … ?'

'I haven't decided. I'm not sure I can take more of this.' I wave towards the door and what lies beyond.

'OK, fine,' Simo replies and slips off his chair to join me on the floor. He sits cross-legged and gives me the look. The one that says, I've done my bit; now it's your turn.

He did break the tension. And I know it wasn't easy. Simo and I aren't exactly used to discussing my sexuality. In fact,

we never talk about it. Not because he's narrow-minded – we wouldn't be best friends if he was – but because it's never come up. Because I've never brought it up. At first, I feared his reaction to my coming out, but as the years passed, I assumed he just knew. It's not exactly an open secret, it's just … open.

People say best friends talk about everything, but people are naive. We all have things we keep from even the closest people in our lives. Simo and I are no exception.

Still, thanks to him there's air in the room again. I'm equal parts grateful and relieved that we're still on speaking terms. That things might not be normal, obviously they're anything but, but at least we're here together. I prop myself up. We still have a problem, one the exact shape and size of the town noticeboard, and I'm still scared to address it. There's just no way around it.

'I don't …' I begin, but I'm unable to finish the sentence. 'I'm not sure … I'm not prepared for this situation.'

'One boat and we're both sitting in it,' Simo replies.

'We need to let people know that we're not … that it's not true.' My throat is dry as chalk as I force out the words. Simo holds my gaze, like he's searching for something in my expression. I tell myself to keep a straight face, to not feel any of the things I'm feeling – like the paralysing fear of getting caught in my lies and losing my friend.

After several heartbeats, he finally nods. 'And we need to find out who put it up there.'

The relief from a minute ago is gone. Because no one could possibly know. I've not told anyone about him. About Simo and the secret I'm so good at hiding, even from myself.

I shove it down deep. And most of the time, I don't think about the way he makes me feel. I don't keep a diary, and if I did, it certainly wouldn't mention Simo in a way that describes him as anything but my best friend.

'Any suspects?' I ask tensely, and receive a shake of his head. Simo doesn't feel the way I feel, so the blame is on me, that much is clear. I'm the one who slipped up and let my feelings show. I was too obvious, not careful enough.

People know that I'm gay. And they also know that Simo and I have been best friends since forever. What they don't know is that I'm particularly gay for Simo. Or at least they didn't until the noticeboard shouted it across town. Now I feel seen in the worst way. Everyone knows I like him more than a best friend would, and denying it is pointless. And yet, it's my only option.

'We have to ask the town council. They're in charge of the noticeboard,' Simo decides. He scrambles out from under the table and gets up. I follow his example, solely because I can't stay on the dirty school floor forever. Simo shoulders his bag with the expression of a man on a mission.

'Let's ask the town council,' I agree with a lump in my throat, wishing I could pretend this hadn't happened. Bury it and never mention it again.

Together we return to hallways filled with loud students. Some try to high-five us, some hum a wedding march. It's so over the top that I can't take them seriously, but there's a knot of dread in my stomach that won't let me relax. I can tell Simo is uncomfortable too. His steps are robotic, his shoulders stiff.

'Don't you think it's weird?' he mumbles in my direction.

'Obviously I do. All of this is weird.'

'No, I mean, why does it specifically say, "Simo and Luca are in love"? It could've said …' He clears his throat and lowers his voice. 'It could've said "Luca loves Simo" or "Simo loves Luca" or any other variation. It's so specific.'

'Well,' I begin, trying to get my thoughts in order, 'someone wants to –' I almost say 'expose' but opt for something else – 'to target us both. Make us uncomfortable. Make us act.'

'Act how?'

I don't have an answer to that. The last thing I know how to do is act. And so I take cover in my own head and hope for the best. That's when I remember.

'Shit,' I say.

'What?' Simo asks.

'I forgot to send Miss M the message on the noticeboard.'



CHAPTER 2 – SIMO

I have never felt more grateful for the emptiness of my home. Most times I find it suffocating, being here on my own, and so I escape to find Luca. Then again, even with my parents around, I also escape to find Luca. But today marks the worst Monday of all Mondays, so I drop my bag as soon as the front door slams behind me and collapse on to the staircase.

Mum has a teacher's conference, and Dad will be showcasing seaside homes to buyers with dreams of the sweet small-town life. I recommend staying far away if they want their business to remain private. Because sooner or later someone will take their laundry and hang it up in the town square.

I groan and press my palms against my eyelids. My mind is a maelstrom, relentlessly replaying the day's events. It started with a text from Louise – a picture of the town noticeboard plus an endless string of heart-eye emojis – and ended with a near-attempted break-in, when Luca and I stood in front of the town hall's firmly locked doors. Clearly neither Mayor Pickering nor Heloise wants to answer our questions.

Whenever one of us has had a shitty day at school, we hole up in Luca's room or slink away to Clifford Island and watch the light fade from the sky. But today I needed to be far away from anyone, including Luca. All day long I've been faking it; Simo on the outside, mess on the inside. Now I feel like there's nothing left of me. Just a Simo-shaped husk sprawled across a staircase.

It's a new feeling, and not one I like. Not the faking being myself thing; I can never fully shake that. When you've lost someone so close to you, a piece of yourself is lost too. You're never whole, but have to pretend to be, so as not to alienate people with your grief, or worse, earn their pity. What's new is that I don't want Luca around. He's the only one who makes me feel like my real self. He's never pushed me to talk about it, that lost piece that I don't have words for.

The message on the noticeboard hit me like a storm without the kindness of preceding thunder, entirely without warning. I was still floating on a cloud of summer memories from our time in Granada: the honey-sweet taste of sangria on my lips mixing with the aroma of Abuela's home-made empanadas, Luca's toes grazing the moss at the bottom of a centuries-old fountain, the city's heat pressing against my skin. But when the realisation struck that the whole town would read these words and think them true, the bliss I felt evaporated in an instant. For hours now the message has been stuck on loop in my head, a tuneless song that won't leave me alone.

SIMO AND LUCA ARE IN LOVE

I'm desperate for a run, just to calm my thoughts, but I can't leave the house for obvious reasons. Plus I haven't eaten. Couldn't get a thing down all day. I force myself up and into the kitchen, where I fill a bowl with honey puffs and milk. I stand while I eat – mechanically, without tasting the food – and watch the street out front.

We live on a tight lane of terraced houses that tourists like to call 'quaint' or 'a pain in the arse' depending on the number of times they've reversed up and down to find parking. Rows of stone cottages, front yards crowded with flower beds, ivy snaking up to the rooftops, the occasional gnome, and our house fits right in with its abundance of daisies.

Dad is obsessed with them. The thing about daisies is that they bloom pretty much all year. It should be a soothing thought, that there is beauty that never dies. But it's the opposite. Daisies last forever; you pick one, and another takes its place, like a botanical hydra. Human lives don't work that way. They're far more fragile.

Since the day we moved here, our garden hasn't been daisy-less once. You won't find a window in this house that doesn't look out on them. Seas of daisies, in varying colours. They're low maintenance, a little sun and water and they're good, though Dad doesn't make it look that way. Sometimes I think he spends more time with his flowers than with us, his family. It's silly to resent a plant, but I can't help thinking that those flowers are shameless attention-seekers.

Dad's battered Chevy appears on the street, and the milk in my stomach sours at the thought of facing him. I place the empty bowl in the sink, grab my school bag and

disappear up into my room, where I sink on to my bed and grab a book off the nightstand. Tío Andrés handed it to me when he dropped us off at the airport at the end of our stay. Federico García Lorca, *Obras selectas*, it reads – selected works of Federico García Lorca. I told him my Spanish wasn't good enough to understand it, but Andrés laughed and took me by the shoulders.

'*Federico García Lorca is your brother and not just because you share a name*,' he had said. '*You're both sons of Granada. Your heart will know the meaning of his words, even if your head won't.*'

I didn't point out that I had been born in another city, in another country, more than a century later than Lorca the poet. Dad's side of the family, all born and bred in the Andalusian city of Granada, have a very different sense of the word 'family' than the one I've grown up with. Mum long ago lost touch with her parents, for reasons she has certainly never shared with me. And though I met her sisters once, I don't think a sole meeting at my brother's funeral counts as close family ties.

Dad, on the other hand, has several group chats with family members going, but because of work, and money, and Mum, we don't see much of them. She'd never admit it, but I suspect it's because Mum doesn't speak Spanish and feels uncomfortable around Dad's boisterous relatives. The only reason I got to go to Granada this summer is because Abuela guilt-tripped Dad into sending me, by painting dramatic scenes of her own death without being able to embrace her faraway grandson one last time. I didn't mind my parents staying behind, because I got a holiday with Luca out of it. The flights were early birthday gifts.

It was overwhelming in the best way, when the family I barely remembered took me into their midst, Luca too, and treated us like they'd known us all our lives. And when Tío Andrés handed me the poetry book, I thanked him and savoured his words.

I pull a slim notebook from beneath my pillow, because that's where secrets are meant to be kept. It's no bigger than my hand, with a mud-brown cover, thick pages and a severely broken spine. It holds my thoughts, fragmented and unfiltered as they come. When I say 'thoughts', I mean flashes of memories or dreams I don't want to forget, quotes from *Obras selectas* and *A Monster Calls.* Words like lost puzzle pieces that will never fit to make a poem. It's messy feelings turned into messy scribbles where words become too rigid to hold them. It's ~~SIMO AND LUCA ARE IN LOVE~~ crossed out so many times it resembles a ragged scar.

It's not a new thought, but always a perplexing one, the possibility that Luca could be in love with me. When you're a boy, and your best friend likes boys, it's not outside the realm of possibility. As if, out of all the boys in the world to fall for, Luca would pick me. As if I wouldn't notice if he suddenly started treating me differently. But he's still the same loyal and genuine boy I met at seven years old.

'Simo?' Dad calls from downstairs, his voice muffled by the closed door. I don't respond, and soon I hear his heavy steps rising to the first floor. The closer he comes, the bigger the urge to jump out of the window. Instead, all I do is slide the notebook beneath the pillow and pick up Lorca's poems again. He knocks twice, and when I remain silent, he sticks his head in. 'Ah, lost in a book, are you?'

Dad is the oldest of his siblings, and though he shares Andrés' dark beard, his cheeks are fuller, and his skin shows lines far too deep for someone in his forties. But I know what grief does to a person, and I wonder if I'll inherit the grey beard or the lines, or both.

I can't detect anything in his eyes that says he knows about the noticeboard. But if he only speaks to his siblings in another country and newcomers looking for seaside homes, he might not know.

'Yes, sorry, lost in a book,' I say.

'That's OK, Simo. Just don't forget your homework, yes?'

I never forget my homework. But that doesn't stop him from reminding me every day. He means well; after all, even though Mum is the primary-school teacher, he's the one who has always helped me at school.

'No Luca today?' he asks, catching me off guard.

'I – no. Maybe later.'

'OK, just let me know when you leave. I'll be in the garden.'

I'm certain he doesn't know. It's not like he'd confront me. He'd take the opposite approach, avoiding a conversation until the situation either resolves itself or is overshadowed by a more urgent problem that must itself be ignored.

I see the way my parents treat Luca. They're polite, but they use this politeness to keep him at a distance. They wouldn't utter a bad word about my best friend, but that doesn't mean they don't hold prejudice against him – and his dad. It's like they suddenly forget to act like normal people whenever they come face to face with someone who's gay. I'm not sure if it's because they're scared they'll say the

wrong thing or whether they disagree with homosexuality as a whole. And I don't know that I want to find out.

The thought stirs something in me, a slow burning in my gut that makes me feel fiercely protective of Luca, despite everything that's going on. I'm not my parents. I would never judge a person because of who they are.

I take out my phone and open the chat with him. A second later, I lock the screen, drop the phone in my lap, only to sigh and reopen it. My fingers hover inches from the keyboard, caught between the desire to pull Luca close and to push him away. That's when the call comes in. The vibration sinks into my bones, shakes me out of my stupor. I pick up on the second ring.

'I know where they'll leave us alone.' Luca's voice in my ear fills me with relief.

'The island?'

'Better. Meet me in five? Bring your bike.'

I race past the coffee shop without stopping. It takes Luca only seconds to pull up next to me. We head up Main Street, past the last bus stop in town, before we're surrounded by fields of green and gold. I have an inkling where we're going, but for now I want to drink up the freedom that comes with leaving Lombard.

Luca's shirt flutters in the breeze, melds itself to his ribcage. The wind plays with the pearl pendant I gave him, like it wants to steal it off his body, but the chain holds fast. We ride in silence, and neither the cows nor the sheep grazing in the fields pay us any attention. Now that I'm gaining distance, it's almost possible to believe

that today didn't happen. That's how absurd this whole scenario feels.

We take a turn on to a gravel path and arrive at a huddle of barns nestled around a well. Anton, the town mascot, is grazing in his paddock and watches us as we stack the bikes against a wall. He's a Highland bull, with a thick orange coat, and a crown of two lopsided horns, one short and thick, the other curving upwards. For some reason he was abandoned by his herd, so the town adopted him.

We skip past the antiques shop and enter a building in the shadow of an oak tree. In an instant, I'm enveloped by the scent of paper and dust. I meet Luca's gaze, his eyes so blue they glow in the half-light, and a smile lifts my face. He knows me better than I know myself. Knows what I need when I don't.

'I brought the new reading list,' Luca says, and unfolds it.

'I've memorised it,' I tell him.

'Of course you have.'

I make my way deeper into the bookshop. It's three floors, divided into fiction and non-fiction only, and organised by surname. Mostly. Random stacks are found in almost every corner, piled beneath armchairs, crammed on the top of the shelves and scraping the ceiling.

Sheila, the owner of the farm and its shops, only stocks second-hand books, but she'll order in new copies where there are gaps. I swiftly track down Shakespeare and Austen, but it takes me longer to unearth the translated works and poetry collections. Not that I mind. I pick up random books and check for handwritten dedications or forgotten bookmarks. If they grab my attention, make me wonder

about the people who left a part of themselves imprinted on the pages, I take them home, even copy them into my notebook. They're like stories within stories, these traces of people who once held the book I'm holding now. Dreaming up strangers' lives keeps me from thinking about my own.

I don't know how much time passes, but when I emerge again, Luca is folded into a wicker chair with a cat in his lap, both of them dozing. I don't make myself known, instead I take the moment to look at him. At first glance, he seems at ease, deep breaths stretching his shirt as his chest expands, front teeth peeking through the gap of his lips. I don't let my attention linger there and soon discover the telltale sign of stress: the raw edges of his nails, bitten down to the flesh. If it hurts me to see it, it must hurt him twice as much.

I almost wake him to tell him that I love him, right there and then. I want it to be a casual affirmation, a promise that I'll always have his back. I see other guys do it, exchange *I-love-you-bros!* like the most natural of goodbyes in the school car park. But it wouldn't land right, the meaning twisted by the insinuation on the noticeboard. Now it's a three-word landmine at the base of our friendship. It makes me regret that I've never said it before. It makes me wonder why I never did.

Luca opens his eyes, halfway at first, then they widen with astonishment.

'That's … a lot of books, Simo.'

I look down at the stack in my arms. 'I got copies for you too.'

'I don't need any.'

'Yes, you do.'

'It's not like I'm going to read them.'

'You'll have to if you plan to pass English.'

'You know I'm not going to open these.'

Luca has plenty of flaws, but this aversion to books is surely his biggest. My attempts at converting him have been fruitless, but I'm determined. Constant dripping wears the stone and all that.

'You can just tell me the plot.'

'Fat chance.'

'Fine, I'll get the audiobooks.'

'You'll have to have copies for class. To quote passages for essays, to underline stuff.'

'I can borrow yours.'

'And copy the notes I write in the margins? No, you can't.'

'Then I'll get them from the library. I don't understand why you need to buy them all when you could borrow them.'

This isn't the first time we're having this debate. Its familiarity fills me with the hope that nothing's changed, that we're still the same people we were before the noticeboard.

'I hate having to return books. I can't enjoy them with a deadline,' I tell him. I need to be able to mark them or open them at any given point to reread favourite passages.

I glance at the door and realise that it's started to rain. That in itself isn't a rarity. You learn to expect the weather's ever-changing moods when living on the coast. The world outside is blurry, daylight dimmed by clouds. Only now do I hear the lazy patter of a thousand little drops hitting the

roof. It's my favourite sound in the world. I think of our bikes getting wet, of my parents at home.

'Let's stay for a bit,' Luca says, eyes half closed again. 'You can start reading now. And tell me what happens.'

I huff but set the books down and give the cat in Luca's lap a good back rub. Then I make myself comfortable on the floor by Luca's chair with my back against the shelves. The air in the shop remains warm, and all I hear is the rain and the cat's gentle purr. I open *Twelfth Night*, but only get past the list of characters before Luca speaks up.

'I'd read your book,' he says, his voice low. 'If you wrote one, I mean. I'd read it.'